

RECENT HISTORY OF THE CHINESE OFFSHORE ISLANDS

As the China mainland was lost to the Communists in 1949 and 1950, Chinese Nationalist forces retreated to islands off the Southeast China coast. None of these islands had previously been occupied by the Communists.

Several major islands and island groups were lost to the Communists in that period. These included (from north to south) the Miao Tao group just north of the Shantung peninsula; the Chushan group off the coast just south of Shanghai; the Wanshan group in the Pearl River estuary; and Hainan Island, which fell in April 1950.

The Communists failed in an attempt to take the Quemoy (Chinmen) in October 1949, however; a Communist force of about 10,000 troops attempted a landing on the north and west beaches of the larger of the Quemoy and was repelled, without ever reaching the beaches, with an estimated 4,000 casualties.

Since late 1950 the Nationalists have maintained almost complete control of the waters off the coast of Fukien and the southern part of the Chekiang coast by their control of some of the offshore islands of these provinces. These Nationalist held-islands fall into three main groups: the northern group between 29-00 and 27-00, centered on the Tachen islands; the central group between 27-00 and 25-30, centered on the Matsu

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islands; and the southern group centered on the Quemoy (Chinmen) islands.

The Nationalists have regarded these islands -- particularly the strong points of the Tachens, the Matsus and the Quemoy, where they have centered their forces -- as outposts in the defense of Formosa, as bases for observation of the Communists and for harrassing raids against Communist positions, and as possible bases for future action against the mainland. The islands have in fact been valuable as listening-posts and as a contribution to Nationalist prestige.

Until the spring of 1953 the Communist threat to the three Nationalist strong points -- the Tachens, the Matsus and the Quemoy -- was confined to the concentration of troops and shipping along the adjacent mainland coast, the occupation and strengthening of forces on certain undefended islands near Nationalist-held islands in the northern and central groups, the capture of one Nationalist-garrisoned island and the occupation of some evacuated islands in the northern group, and probing operation in the southern group.

In May and June 1953 Communist forces occupied 13 islands of the northern group, later abandoning three of these. Two of the islands abandoned at that time were re-occupied in May 1954.

In June 1953 the Nationalists attempted to retake three islands, the largest being Talushan, south of the Tachen

group. The Nationalists landed on two of the islands but failed in two attempts to take Talushan against a large Communist garrison and soon withdrew from the area.

During July 1953 the Communists occupied six islands of the central group and attempted without success to land on islands of the southern group. In the same month the Nationalists made a major raid on Tungshan island northeast of Swatow; Nationalist paratroopers jumped into murderous Communist crossfire, lost half their number, and failed to make contact with Nationalist amphibious forces, compelling all Nationalist forces to withdraw after 44 hours of a planned three-day occupation.

The Nationalists began in August 1953 to improve their defensive capabilities in the major offshore islands. The ineffective Tachen garrison was relieved by the good 46th division of the 75th Army and an American-trained officer was placed in command. The Matsu and Quemoy garrisons in the spring of 1954 were replaced by four MDAP-equipped and American-trained divisions. Even with these improvements, however, the Nationalists remained incapable of holding any of the offshore islands, without outside assistance, against a determined Communist assault.

From August 1953 until May 1954 there was no significant action by either Communist or Nationalist forces against offshore islands held by the other. On 15 May 1954 an

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estimated 3,000 Communist troops landed unopposed on six islands within 20 miles of the Tachens; the landing forces included 20 ships, and four MIG-15's provided air cover. Naval and air activity by both sides following the landings were on a larger scale than in previous campaigns, but the Nationalists soon became less aggressive, probably as a result of losses to stronger Communist forces, and the fighting ceased after three days. American naval forces visited the Tachens on 1 June and in August.

In early July Peiping Radio began a propaganda campaign threatening to "liberate" Formosa and the offshore islands. In August an intensification of this propaganda, increased reconnaissance raids on the Quemoy, and reports of troop movements in the Amoy area, all suggested that the Communists would soon undertake a probing action against the Quemoy or some other major Nationalist-held island group in an effort to test American intentions as regards the defense of these islands.

On 3 September Communist artillery in the Amoy area shelled the northern and western sides of the larger Quemoy, saturated the smaller Quemoy, and hit at Nationalist naval vessels in nearby waters. Strong American naval and air forces moved into Formosan waters near the Quemoy on 5 September. Sporadic Communist firing on the Quemoy had continued since 3 September, but there has as yet been no Communist air activity in the area and no unusual naval or ground force activity.